UNEXPECTED DIVIDEND

July 8, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church

Scripture
Exodus 1:6-14, 22-2:10
Matthew 10:34-42

"Whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water, because he is a disciple...shall not lose his reward."
-Matthew 10:42 (RSV)

Sooner or later you have to ask what they thought they were going to get out of it. Those twelve - Peter, Andrew, James and John, Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Thaddeus, Simon and Judas - what do you suppose they had in mind when they threw in with him which, for each of them, meant walking away from a secure, stable, respectable and predictable life they were living. People do that sort of thing on occasion - lay down what they have been doing for many years and walk away into a new future. People sell out, cash in, and move to Florida, or travel around the world, go back to school, even Seminary. People change careers, walk away from their families and marriages, sign up with the Marine Corps. People do it to seek their fortune, to strike it rich, to find meaning, peace, happiness, or because what they are doing is no longer making them happy, or because they are bored. People walk away from one life and into a new life because they assume the new will in some way be a better life than the old.

It is never arbitrary. It may happen dramatically, but it is never without a high degree of intentionality and hope and some fairly specific expectations. So sooner or later, if you spend much time thinking about the New Testament and the story of Jesus, you find yourself asking what those twelve expected. What was the payoff, the reward? It's no reflection on their character, sincerity or integrity. It's just that we don't do anything apart from some expectation about the results of our doing it, particularly a career and life change of the magnitude of theirs.

They had walked away from their jobs as fishermen and tax collectors to follow Jesus of Nazareth, and, the way Matthew tells it, they listened as he taught large and growing crowds of people about a new way of being moral. And they watched as he interacted with people, comforting, consoling, healing some of them. And then, Matthew says, he stopped the teaching and healing and sat them down, the twelve of them, to talk a little bit about what it was going to be like following him, what they might expect, what the rewards were really going to be.

And the way he does it, it's not so much a workshop on leadership development as it is an opportunity for them to reconsider their decision, to look honestly at the probable outcome. It was a moment, I think, of power and importance and destiny. Like the moment in the fine motion picture, "Glory," when the black Union regiment, on the beach in South Carolina, sees the Confederate fort ahead, solid, well defended, impregnable. And you know they can't do it and won't do it, and something inside you says, "stop - be reasonable - think about the results of this gesture which in military terms appears to be futile, use some common sense" and they keep coming and you see the backs straighten and the eyes harden because there is a lot more at stake here than survival, and because they know suddenly that their being there is about black people in this new country as slaves - or as free people, it's about being black and a man, and about stereotypes and racism and pride and the future. And so they do it - they give their lives away to prove something, to make a point; and I don't know what it feels like to be black and see that powerful scene, but I do know that it was one of the most unforgettable moments I have ever witnessed in a movie.

So, I think, that's the kind of moment it is when Jesus of Nazareth sits these twelve men down and forces on them the topic of the probable outcome of their decision. It was a moment... Matthew 10.

After he has told them a little about where they will be going and what they will be doing, told them to travel light and to expect opposition, he deals with their expectations - the rewards they are anticipating as a result of following him.

Now the cardinal rule of sermon preaching is to "not let your exegesis show": not try to dazzle the congregation with what you know about the Greek translation of Aramaic dialogue, couched in the peculiar cultural mores of first-century Palestine. Harry Emerson Fosdick quipped in a lecture on preaching that the people who come to hear a sermon on Sunday morning really don't care about whatever happened to the Jebusites and Moabites. I'd like not only to disregard that venerable rule, but to do so totally, because there are some very significant differences in the way this passage is translated.

You might even want to get it back out and look at it again (if you don't mind "peering through the darkness.")

The Revised Standard Version reads:

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth: I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother."

Those are familiar words, difficult and perplexing.

One of the best new translations is the Anchor Bible. It argues persuasively for an alternate of Matthew 10:34 & 35 which sounds like this:

> "Do not think that I have come to impose peace on earth by force: I have come neither to impose peace, nor yet to make war. I have come to divide... a man against his father, a woman against her mother."

In fact, the two prevalent expectations and hopes were that when the Messiah came he would be strong enough to impose peace, to enforce peace, within Israel by the sword and that done, to extend God's Kingdom on earth by military conquest. It was a sweet dream, the dream of every empire, from Babylonian to Roman to British, a united and peaceful nation, master of its own destiny, strong enough to impose its will on its neighbors; which in Israel's case, was God's will, everyone assumed.

That may be what the people expect of the Messiah. That may be what you expected to participate in when you decided to follow me, but that's not what you are going to get, Jesus told them.

In fact, and here's the critical point, the whole notion of following me for personal gain - whatever it is - even if it is martyrdom in a holy war against our enemies - misses the mark. I am asking you to follow me for the sake of others and not for your own sake. And even though you will not get what you want or expect, my promise is that your reward will be full.

> "One who grasps at self will lose it, but one who rejects self on my account will gain it."
> [Anchor Bible, Matthew 10:39]

There is some radical new truth here but there is also common truth. As a matter of fact, if the Anchor translation is the accurate one, and we're talking about a division between people who are closely related and not enmity, there is considerable wisdom here. Of course fathers and sons and mothers and daughters divide over many things: politics and economics and morality and religion and cleaning up your room and how late were you out last night. It's part of the developmental facts of life. If there is no conflict, no challenge of authority, no division, there is no individuation, no maturation.

On a broader scale, new thinking will always result in division, often among people who are rather close. "A House Divided" is the name of the Lincoln Exhibit at the Chicago Historical Society. Slavery and the decision to restrict and finally eliminate it divided the nation and sometimes brothers and fathers and sons fought on opposite sides. I belonged to a national fraternity in college and when we decided to receive into membership a minority person, the national executives flew up from Atlanta to argue us down on the basis that our decision would divide us from our brothers in the South. No new idea ever existed for long without challenge and division: the eight-hour working day, child labor laws, were vigorously challenged and opposed before they became law.

"Genius," said Arnold Toynbee, "will always create intolerable tension in society." And so Jesus was bound to stir up conflict simply because his ideas were new.

But there is more. At the heart of this discussion he had with his disciples is the question with which we began, their expectations, their reasons for following him.

Most of us, I think, have a bit of a problem with this whole matter of religion and rewards. A few years ago there was an article in a national magazine about a born again businessman who had attempted to buy a major retail company, came up short, somehow found the additional several million dollars and attributed it to God. "A miracle," he said. "People make religion too complicated. It's really just a matter of knowing what you want and asking for it."

An acquaintance of mine was moving to another city; couldn't sell his house, was close to a financial disaster, a buyer appeared, eager to pay what my friend was asking, and when he told it later, it always sounded like a reward for being on the right side theologically.

It's a persistent idea - the prosperity of the righteous: rewards for being good. It's there in the Bible, argued, discussed and finally rejected by Job, for instance, and ultimately by Jesus himself. But it's there and it's surely a part of the religious mystique. Be good and be rewarded: if not here, in this life, then in the next life. It always seemed to me that if you're following Jesus in order to win your place in heaven, you've missed the point. The point is learning to forget about yourself. The point is to stop "grasping at self," to lose self and in the process to find it. There's a sense in which religion that offers the reward of salvation is the last bastion of selfishness. There's a sense in which religion that asks people to follow for any reasons other than the love and joy of it has missed the point.

We are rethinking the matter culturally. The Gallup organization reports that people of all ages are searching for deeper meaning in life that there is a growing sense that the materialistic binge of the 80s was morally bankrupt and simply ineffective. It didn't work. It doesn't make us happy, fulfilled, peaceful. In fact, it appears to make us pretty unhappy. There is, it seems, a new thirst and hunger for spiritual depth, for values that matter.

An article in the New York Times two weeks ago told the story of a modern, upwardly mobile couple, Susan and Robert Lawley. She worked for Goldman Sachs, he for Banker's Trust. They worked very hard and made a lot of money. They drove a Mercedes and a Lincoln Continental to work in Manhattan every day, owned a beach house, motorboat, matching Rolex watches and took their eleven-year-old son on a European vacation annually.

Driving home from work at ten o'clock one night, Susan Lawley burst into tears. "Tonight, like most nights, I'd miss his bedtime." So they changed - not only their income, but their life style and their values and their definition of reward.

So the issue comes at each of us. We may not earn as much as the Lawleys, but the difference is relative. The issue really is: who we're working for, what we expect to have at the end of the day, how we define our rewards.

The radical claim of Christianity is not that there are simply different rewards, dividends that accrue for eternity, but that there is a whole new and better way of thinking about our lives.

The claim is not that we are to follow Christ by withdrawing from the world. It is not a new asceticism. We are called to live life in the world: we are called to follow Jesus, not by withdrawing to the splendid solitude of a monastery, or even the ecclesiastical isolation of a rigid legalism. We are called to follow him in the world where life is lived and money is earned and spent, and capital is accrued and invested for all kinds of purposes, and people love and hate, and heal and hurt.

Jesus decided to sit his disciples down and level with them about the probable outcome. So the issue comes to us personally.

Ronald Goetz of Elmhurst College wrote recently about what is in the mind of most of us when we think about passages like these. Goetz talks about what he calls our "premeditated disobedience." There's a sense in which we know we can't one day decide to stop thinking about ourselves, stop weighing the personal implications of everything we do, can't stop anticipating at least feeling good inside about making some sacrificial gesture. So we are going to disobey him. Goetz wrote: "I have neither the resolve to follow him nor the consistency to turn from him. I am stuck with him and him with me." [Christian Century, 7/4/90]

It is so clear and so simple that we miss it, I fear. The rewards for which we are already willingly giving our lives are right there in front of us. Like the knight in the old legend, whose pursuit of the Holy Grail is cut short by the leper at his own gate, and who when he finally sees the leper and reaches out to help him discovers that the cup of cold water he offers is the Holy Grail - sometimes our salvation is in front of us, a gift that will be given to us as we stop the frantic effort to find it. [The Legend of Sir Launfal, James Russell Lowell]

In the plainest language possible, Jesus said the most important words they ever heard:

> "One who grasps at self will lose it, but one
> who rejects self on my account will gain it."

Sometimes the salvation of your soul is no more illusive than another human being who needs you: the leper at the gate, the homeless woman on your doorstep, your dearest one who needs your patience, your child who needs your love, your parents or co-workers. Sometimes the salvation of your soul is as near as the moment when you forget about it and simply, for the love of Christ, extend a cup of cold water.

What you get for that may not be what you wanted, or what you thought you wanted. It will be more important than that, he promised. It will be the very saving of your soul.

Amen.